

# “Abide With Me”

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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “Abide With Me”

## READINGS

When I sat down at the table for breakfast, the doll was at my place. Mama had made hair out of dark brown yarn, and she'd embroidered eyes, a nose, and a mouth on the face. She had covered the yarn hair with a yellow kerchief embroidered with red flowers.

“She's gorgeous Mama,” I managed to murmur. “But she doesn't look like the pilgrim woman in the picture.”

“No?” mama said.

“She looks like you in that photograph you have that was taken when you were a girl.”

“Of course,” Mama said. “I did that on purpose. What's a pilgrim, shaynkeit? A pilgrim is someone who came here from the other side to find freedom. That's me Molly. I'm a pilgrim.”

From *Process and Reality* – by Alfred North Whitehead

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That “all things flow” is the first vague generalization which the... intuition of men has produced... Without doubt, if we are to go back to that ultimate, integral experience, unwarped by the sophistications of theory... the flux of things is one ultimate generalization around which we must weave our philosophical systems... But there is a rival notion, antithetical to the former which... dwells on the permanence of things...

The best renderings of [this] integral experience... is often to be found in the utterances of religious aspiration... accordingly we find in the first two lines of a famous hymn the union of the two notions in one integral experience:

“Abide with me; fast falls the eventide.”

... here we find formulated the complete problem of metaphysics...

(From Barbara Cohen, cited in *Kol Haneshamah*)

\* \* \*

<sup>17</sup>For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

(From the book of the prophet Isaiah, from chapter 66)

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## SERMON

I was talking about pilgrims last week, not the Plymouth colony so much as the idea that we are all pilgrims on a journey, starting with Abraham and Sarah and continuing to this day. The reading from Barbara Cohen reminds us that pilgrim can describe anyone, really, anyone searching for what scripture calls 'a better country.' This pilgrimage is not easy, as the Plymouth colony discovered and the rocky beginnings of this church made clear. But they all kept going, kept trying, kept at it.

Why talk about history? Last month I presented a vision for the future of this church, a dream that asks what I believe we must do to be here a century from now. How could I think so far into the future and believe it could happen? Well, I looked backward to the previous century and saw that we had already come a long way.

A hundred and fifty years ago this church was literally two churches quarreling over who owned the pulpit and the bible. The issue was church discipline and how to keep people on the theological straight and narrow. Both churches believed in this, but they disagreed on how to do it. On beliefs and doctrines they were as rock-ribbed as any evangelicals then or now. Forty years later the church was not only united, it was downright radical in its theology, accused of heresy by the wider association of Baptists. What happened?

John Herman Randall. Arriving in 1896 scarcely two years after graduating from the progressive University of Chicago Divinity School, he brought that attitude with him. (You should know that this school was Baptist, which seems at the least ironic now that Baptist is a byword for conservatism.) Randall preached what he called Applied Christianity, in which the measure of one's faith was how well it guided your life now, not whether it kept up payments on your celestial life insurance. The niceties of doctrine were to him secondary to living faithfully in the world. Randall spoke of it this way - "How pitifully small and unimportant are the things we have been quarreling about in centuries past, compared with the great truth that 'love to God and love to man' is the whole law."

Randall's new Applied Christianity, though had to fall on fertile ground here to take root. It did because of his predecessor, John L. Jackson, who came in 1891 and told the church when he arrived that "I believe the Gospel has to do with getting us into a better condition to live. Its first aim is to touch humanity and better the people." Jackson reflected the sentiment of that movement called the Social Gospel, which arose in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to galloping changes in society. Clergymen like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch realized religion had a duty to serve the poor and downtrodden as well as obtain salvation. This was not a doctrinal discussion. Jesus was always clear about serving the poor and others. What was new was moving mobilizing churches to do something about it. This was the era of the YMCA, the Salvation Army and other Christian charities that organized to meet the needs of immigrants, children, women, workers, and others. Jackson echoed the times, as it were, telling Fountain Street Baptist Church that Christianity meant serving the present common good as well as the future personal good. He was a Christian Socialist, when that was possible, who stood for union rights and condemned robber barons.

Randall's liberal theology thus fell on prepared ground, soil loosened by dealing with social issues of the day. Notice the pattern – abstract doctrines responding to concrete facts. Randall spent ten years here pushing the church to the more liberal interpretations he learned in Chicago. Despite oblique accusations of heresy from the wider Baptist association, the church supported him and even refused to accept his resignation in 1901. But in 1905 he could resist the offer no longer and headed to New York City, eventually to serve alongside the Unitarian John Haynes Holmes in the new Community Church of New York. His son, John Herman Randall Jr. followed the paternal path, becoming a well known historian of philosophy and original

signer of the Humanist Manifesto in 1933.

My point in telling you this story is that once you start on a pilgrimage of faith, in search of that 'better country' of the spirit which I described last time, you may not end up where you expect. The place you imagine is not likely the place you will arrive, as the Plymouth colony discovered when it found Cape Cod and not Virginia. Similarly, the later settlers of Boston set out to create a holy commonwealth that ultimately failed. But the city they founded and the nation that grew up with it is far greater than they ever imagined or planned.

Fountain Street Church set out a hundred and fifty years ago to become a Baptist church filled with visible saints. It did not arrive at that destination – not because it gave up, but because every step they took led to a new challenge. Addressing those concrete challenges – who could be a member and how shall we live as a church – led to questions of Christian social duty, which in turn begat questions about what defined a Christian in general. This dialogue between concrete and abstract, ideal and real, is what progressive religion is about. It takes this world seriously, this life, and modifies its beliefs as facts demand.

That hoary hymn we sang, "Abide With Me," the very heartbeat of Victorian piety, is also at the heart of this liberal church and liberal religion itself. British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead lifts it up at the center of his imposing and nearly impenetrable work, *Process and Reality*. He notes that "here we find formulated the complete problem of metaphysics" which is namely to find out what changes and what endures. It is the heart of religion because, as a colleague of mine, Forrester Church, puts it – religion is our response to the twin facts of being alive and having to die.

Religion around the world says there is something that abides amid the change. Even we here where progressive religion, that which changes, is at the center of our way of life. We tend to forget that we also affirm that something also abides. Our progressive side allows us to disagree mightily about what that is, as we are always seeking to find out more about that abiding truth, but we agree (if silently) that something underlies and surrounds and over-arches the passing flux of life and death.

What sets us apart as a church is that we do not need to agree on precisely what it is that abides and sustains and redeems. That's because whatever we think it is will be tested and refined by reality. "Our knowledge is a torch of smoky pine that lights the pathway but one step ahead," says George Santayana. What does not change, and is thus the only article of faith we have, is that we believe this existence - your life and that of others - matters. I have no empirical proof nor do you. That's why we call it belief and not knowledge. But we would not be here live if we did not think existence matters.

If you believe this, and if you are here you want to believe that, there is a necessary result. You have no choice but to live as though you matter and as though others do as well. No easy task, as the antiquity and imperfect practice of the golden rule attest. That's why this church is more than a pulpit. Learning how to live this way is what makes this a school of the soul, as I have called it.

The transient quality of life, that pilgrimage through time we all make, is easy to see around here. The permanent, the abiding is what needs to be acknowledged. What abides at Fountain Street Church, unlike what abides in the nature of existence, is something we can know and should.

- What abides here is commitment to live the pilgrim life as people and as a church. We do that by putting beliefs to work in life, personally and as a congregation. John L. Jackson set us up to think liberally by getting us to live that way first. The cutting edge of thought, the place where we free our minds to grow, will always be where belief hits the road of life.

- If the only article of faith we have is to believe life matters, then you have to live that

way. And not just for yourself but for everyone. FSC must do the same, acting as though it mattered and everyone else does too. If we do not believe in our own life, sustaining it and growing it, who will? But if we believe only in our own life and ignore others, then do we believe in anything worth believing?

Advent begins next week, and we shall celebrate it as we have for a half a century. But even this cannot abide forever. In time other songs and other banners, other words and other preachers will come. Our particular ways and names will vanish. But the spirit that we have now, which was in them who nameless went before us and worshipped differently than we, that spirit has and will abide. Faith, hope, love and joy, however called, however lived, will abide - so long as we live them, not just say them. And for this we give thanks.